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SERMON,

PREACHED AT

ST. MARY'S, GUILDFORD,

ON

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 12, 1800;

BEING THE DAY APPOINTED

FOR A

GENERAL FAST.



BY

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FELLOW OF EXETER COLLEGE, OXFORD.



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SERMON, &c.

EZRA viii. 22, 23.

The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him, but his power and his wrath are against all them that forsake him; so we fasted, and besought our God for this, and he was intreated of us.

ONE of the grandest and most pleasing ideas that the human mind can entertain, is the constant agency of a divine Providence; it always affords rational and true comfort to the soul of man, to be persuaded, that he, who created all things by the word of his power, is at this moment, and in every point of time, graciously engaged in directing the operations of the natural and moral world; at once for the production of uni-

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verfal as well as individual good. It could not be reconciled to our conception of the divine nature, that God, who in the beginning faid, “ let there be light, and there was light ;”—who faid, “ let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven, to divide the day from the night, and let them be for figns and for feafons, and for days and years ;”—and who faid, “ let us make man after our own image and fimilitude :”—It cannot, I fay, in reafon be fupposed, that that great and glorious Being, who fpake the word and the world was made, who commanded, and it came forth, fhould remain unconcerned about the works of his own hands. He is not only the Creator, but he is alfo the Governor of the univerfe. As he made it by his power, fo he rules it by his wifdom. The annals of the whole world, as well as the hiftory of every nation under heaven, accordingly declare the controlling power of his Providence ; they proclaim, with the voice of univerfal truth, this eternal record, that “ verily there is a reward for the righteous, doubtlefs there is a God which judgeth the earth.”

Without

Without recurring to other particulars, for a proof of this, I might only instance the tremendous event of the flood ; or, if the universal deluge be too far distant, I might mention the various calamities of the Jews, whom God had chosen as his peculiar people, to serve him ; but who, by frequent rebellion and gross idolatry, justly became objects of his wrath and anger, and who, as a punishment, were carried away into divers captivities ; whose city of Jerusalein has long since suffered the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet ; and who, we all know, remain at this moment scattered over the face of the earth, being a by-word of contempt among the nations ; affording a standing memorial in the face of the whole world, to whom vengeance belongeth ; and a living miracle, through all ages, of the providential power of God. I might appeal to the terrible destruction of Tyre and Sidon, of Sodom and Gomorrah, on whom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all : Or I might call to your remembrance events which have happened in your own

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country,

country, a country favoured of heaven so highly,—events which have come to pass recently, as well as in days of old;—things which your fathers have declared unto you, as well as what you yourselves have seen and heard;—circumstances, a variety of which point out the guardian care of Providence, and bespeak, to the intelligent mind, the visible finger of God. But think not that I labour to prove this truth; you have felt it, no doubt, every one of you, in your various particular concerns of life: As individuals, this most assuredly must have been the case: yet, on this head, I would rather address you as Christians, who believe in the eternal truths of the Gospel; which declares, by the voice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, that the very hairs of your head are numbered, and that not even a sparrow falleth to the ground without the knowledge of your heavenly Father; “for the hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him, and his power and his wrath are against all them that forsake him.”

Man

Man is a being dependent on his Maker ; in himself only he is wretched and miserable and poor and blind, and naked ; an unhappy moment humbles his pride ; a trifling accident can lay him in the dust. Being of himself unable to help himself, affliction and calamity teach him to apply to his Almighty Protector ; they bid him look up to that high and lofty one who inhabiteth eternity, who dwelleth in the heavens, “ in whom we live and move and have our being.” The most sublime, and at the same time, the most delightful use of our faculties, is to employ them in preserving a spiritual communion with our Maker, our Father, and our God. Even while on earth, the genuine and true source of our happiness is, that our conversation be in heaven. The exalted Majesty of the great Jehovah is indeed infinitely above us ; his glory far exceedeth any thing that we can imagine ; and his perfections are now only known in part, for we at present see through a glass darkly, and not face to face. Yet, even now, by supplication and prayer, we may humbly approach his di-

vine Majesty ; we may hold delightful communion with our Creator, and the soul of man, while remaining in the tabernacle of the flesh, may enter into a divine intercourse with the spirit of God.

Now, if there was ever a time that called on men to look up to an Almighty Providence, and to put their confidence in him, it is the present moment. (We live in an age of great and miraculous event.) Within these few years, a torrent of novel circumstances has burst forth, flowing without intermission, like the irruption of a volcano, or like the great deluge ; while the trembling and astonished world has been confounded and overwhelmed by what has come to pass. Many of the prophecies denounced in Scripture, have been fatally witnessed. Familiar scenes of murder have hardened the human heart. The angry passions of men have been inflamed to the highest pitch of brutal fury. This moral concussion hath vibrated to every quarter of the world ; powers and principalities have felt the shock ; the palace and the cottage have alike fallen. (The womb of time at this moment is big with

with great events. “ Ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars, see that ye be not troubled ; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there shall be famines and pestilences and earthquakes, in divers places. There shall be signs in the sun and in the moon, and in the stars, and upon earth distress of nations with perplexity ; the sea and the waves roaring : Men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming upon the earth.”

This piece of Scripture was written for our sakes, and it is a solemn warning to put us in remembrance of that latter day, when we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ, when every one of us shall be called upon individually, to give up an account of himself to God, and be rewarded or punished as he shall be found to have done good or evil. “ These shall go into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal.”

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We

We are all equally ignorant of the precise time when this awful period shall come to pass: “ of that day and hour,” says the great Redeemer, “ knoweth no man, no not the angels in heaven, but my Father only.” It is our duty, however, as Christians, to discern the signs of the times, and to examine how far they correspond with what the Evangelists have foretold: and, according to the express prophecies of the New Testament, we cannot but perceive, that the powers of Antichrist are passing away. The Gospel has been propagated in different parts of the *new* world, and pagans are daily added to the church: superstition and popery begin to hide their diminished heads, and the delusive imposture of Mahomet appears to fall low before the kingdom of God and his Christ. “ There shall be scoffers in the last times,” says St. Peter; and too fatally we know there are. There are those, to the shame of human nature be it spoken, who are ashamed of their Saviour, and who neglect or deny the Lord of life and glory. The melancholy truth is but too certain; I tremble at the mention of such daring impenitence

penitence and wilful unbelief. We can do no more than pity their error, pray for their conversion, and be grieved for their hardness of heart. Yet our trust is, that even evil, by the providence of the Almighty, shall turn to good; we still pray, that his kingdom may come; and our hope is, that the very people who have publicly or individually denied their Redeemer, and blasphemed their God; who have broken his Sabbaths, violated his laws, and changed his everlasting decrees, shall, by his grace, return to a more rational faith in Jesus Christ, and worship God in spirit and in truth. Of this, however, we are assured, from undoubted authority, that this Gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world, for a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come.

And here there is one important particular which demands our serious attention; I mean the fatal degeneracy which is spoken of in Scripture, at this awful visitation of God. “As the days of Noah were, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days that were before the flood, they
were

were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came and took them all away ; so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be ; therefore be ye also ready, for in such an hour as ye think not, the Son of Man cometh.” How then does this description apply to the present day ? Does it or does it not bear any resemblance to the manners of the age in which we live ? “ Let every man make answer for himself, and prove his own work, then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone : For the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in the which the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat ; the earth also and all the works that are therein shall be burned up ; seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the day of God.”

I have now called your attention to three important particulars,—to the over-ruling providence of that all-seeing and all-mighty
God,

God, who governs and directs the world ;— to those signal events which have passed and are now passing in review before your eyes,— and to that solemn day of account and everlasting judgment at which we must all appear. They are awful ideas, a good deal connected together, and of the highest moment to our present and eternal happiness ; which the unbeliever cannot disprove, which no man can deny, and which the sincere follower of Christ is never to doubt. They are impressive truths, which convey a solemn memento, calculated to rouse the slumbering soul of man, and to recall him to a sense of duty to his God. This is not a period to flatter and temporise ; it is not a season “ to speak peace when there is no peace ;” it is not a time to indulge in criminal ease and fancied security : to cure the gangrene, the wound must be probed to the bottom ; we must go to the very root of the evil. “ Cry aloud and spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgressions, and the house of Israel their sins. Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.”

Again and again have we met on the present

sent occasion ; the trumpet has been blown in Zion, an alarm has been sounded in the holy mountain ; the fast has been sanctified, the solemn assembly has been called, and we have professed to humble ourselves by fasting and prayer. But while ye have thus fasted and besought your God, what has been the real effect on your lives ? Have ye rent your hearts and not your garments ? Hath it repented you of your sins, and have ye reformed the evil of your ways ? Have ye humbled your pride ? Have ye turned to God, and placed your sure confidence in his almighty power, remembering that the hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him ? When Jonah cried, “ Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown ; ” the people of Nineveh believed in God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest even to the least, for they said, “ who can tell if God will repent and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not.”

National disasters, the scourge of war, the pestilence of famine, and all their attendant calamities, have been generally found to bring a stubborn and rebellious

people to a sense of duty : When the judgments of the Lord are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness. But have these taught us their most useful lesson ? It is true, we have fasted and besought our God ; we have vowed repentance and reformation ; at least, we have pretended to do so, But have repentance and reformation followed ? In our humiliation, have public luxuries been retrenched, private vices reformed, or the service of God been more strictly observed ? In vain should we call it national repentance, while the commands of the Almighty are neglected, his laws despised, and his *sabbaths* profaned in the most open manner, contrary to all laws, both human and divine. “ Shall I not visit for these things, saith the Lord, and shall I not be avenged of such a nation as this ? ” In vain should we call it national reformation, while the luxury of Asia spreads its deadly venom, and the sinful customs of Europe become every day more corrupt, while the ordinances of Christ are neglected, and many of the laws of God are *publicly* transgressed. Whence is it then that these judgments have not had
their

their wonted effect? Is it that we have not yet filled up the measure of our iniquities? Is it that our evils have not been sufficiently great? Is it that there is no ground for alarm—no difficulties which stare us in the face? It will be wisdom to avert the danger before it is too late; it will be prudent to call upon God while he may be found. He will have mercy if you truly repent;—if you turn from your sins, he will abundantly pardon. Thus says the omnipotent Ruler of the world, “ At what instant I shall speak concerning a kingdom to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; if that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them.—But because I have called, and ye refused, I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded, but ye have set at nought my counsel, and would none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity, I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as a desolation, and your destruction as a whirlwind, when distress and anguish cometh upon you: then shall they call

call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but shall not find me, for that they hated knowledge, and did not chuse the fear of the Lord."

If then you would have national amendment, the reform must begin at home, and commence in private life. Individuals must purify themselves before the body corporate can be found. Let every man first look to himself alone, and set an example of a virtuous and a godly life. "Let his light so shine before men, that they may see his good works, and glorify their Father which is in Heaven." Despair not from the idea that it will have no effect. Say not that you are only as one of a thousand, and that your behaviour, as an individual, will be only as a drop in the ocean: Be assured that it will have its due influence: "Take heed unto thyself, and to thy doctrine. Be thou an example of the believers in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity:" it directly has an effect on yourself, which is your chief concern, and it will operate on others:—it must have a weight on all around.

Are you then patriots indeed? Are you true friends to your native land? Are you well-affectioned to your country, which contains every thing you esteem most near and dear under Heaven? Do you feel any attachment to those laws which protect you in the secure enjoyment of your lives and property? Is it in your wishes to possess the social charities, and the dear relation of father, son, and brother, unviolated? Do you value at all your civil and religious liberty? Have you any regard for the well-poised government of the state, and the spiritual and true worship of God, which you enjoy through your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? Call these to mind; and ponder them in your hearts. Nor will you forget, that the eventful period in which you live has been marked by the most signal interpositions of divine Providence; that this country has been distinguished by an exemption from that anarchy and confusion which have convulsed the rest of Europe; by the happy issue of certain conjunctures, which wore a formidable and disastrous appearance; and by the recovery

and continuance of that invaluable life, to which the government of these kingdoms is entrusted. I might easily recount these and various other blessings, public as well as private, which have befallen this kingdom;—a kingdom, which the Almighty seems to have chosen above all the nations of the earth; And shall it be presumptuous to say, if ye fall not from him, that he will still make it his delight, his resting-place, and his abode?—I might, I say, animate your feelings by a remembrance of those various blessings which you have received at the hand of God: And could it be thought they were forgotten, I might touch you to the very quick, and call upon your gratitude. But if not unmindful of these benefits, you will reflect that there is but one proper acknowledgment that can be made: In return for so many and so great things which the Almighty hath done for you, you are required to perform his will, and live in obedience to the Gospel of his only-begotten Son. He calls upon every one of you to exert his full and fair proportion for the saving of his country, by

advancing the glory of God, and promoting peace and good-will amongst men; “ for the hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him, but his power and his wrath are against all them that forsake him.”

“ We fasted and besought our God for this,” says my text, “ and he was intreated of us.” Thus did Ezra and his people, when they were encompassed by enemies: they trusted in God, and were holpen.—The same divine assistance will be reached out to you, if you rely with confidence on that Being, whose wrath endureth but the twinkling of an eye, and who even in his anger thinketh upon mercy to all them that turn to him.—We are now met together to humble ourselves before the Almighty Lord, before the everlasting God of heaven and of earth, to turn away his heavy judgments which are ready to fall upon us. “ He is nigh unto all them that call upon him; yea, all such as call upon him faithfully. Therefore take we heed while the day of salvation lasteth; for the night cometh when no man can work. Let us, while we have the light, believe in the light, and
walk

walk as children of the light. Turn ye from all your wickedness, and your sin shall not be your destruction. Although we have sinned, yet have we an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for our sins only, but for the sins of the whole world."

Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of mankind, was the Prince of Peace. The Gospel, in every part, proclaims peace and good-will to men, and enjoins its disciples, if it be possible, and as much as lieth in you, to live peaceably with all men. Nay, it further commands you, to resist not evil, but "to love your enemies, to bless them that curse you, to do good to them that hate you, and to pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you." War, on the principles of Christianity, if at all, cannot be justified, but in case of absolute necessity. To oppose the wanton rage of brutal violence, it is the last melancholy resort on this side heaven. You are compelled to appeal to the God of battles as your Umpire and your Judge. When constrained

strained to do this, remember into whose hands you commit your care. "Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. There is no king or people that can be saved by the multitude of an host. God putteth down one, and setteth up another." Unless Jehovah goeth forth with our fleets and armies, vain is the work of man. Our wooden walls, the great bulwark of the nation, may, indeed, be the humble instrument, but we must ascribe the victory unto Almighty God. "It was thy right hand, and thine arm, and the light of thy countenance, because thou hadst a favour unto us."

While you are contending in the sacred cause of truth and virtue, for genuine liberty, for rational government, and for your holy religion; consider your Lord and Master; think on the Captain of your salvation; remember whose soldiers you are; under whose banners you fight; and the spiritual weapons of your warfare, which are mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds. "Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to with-

withstand in the evil day; having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breast-plate of righteousness, and your feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace: above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench the fiery darts of the wicked. Trust in the anchor of hope, and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. So shall ye be guided into the haven where ye would be—into the haven of peace, where love and joy dwell together; so shall ye fight the good fight, overcome the world, and obtain the crown of glory, incorruptible in the heavens, where sorrow and fighting shall be passed away, where the din of war shall be no longer heard, and the rage of battle be known no more.

Since, then, righteousness exalteth a nation, since religion and virtue are the delight of God, and ornament of man, follow these—these will bring peace at the last. And while you humble yourselves before the throne of grace, “be not sorry as men without hope.” Shall a nation, professing
the

the Gospel of Jesus Christ, be cast down by despair? Will ye fall off from your Creator? Will ye curse God and die? “Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon!” Be not alarmed beyond reason; do not despond through fear and unbelief. Let not panic strike terror into the soul, nor the croaking voice of angry discontent and boding melancholy, deprive you of full hope in him, who can save from the very jaws of death and destruction.—Who shall separate you from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? In all these things you are more than conquerors through Him that loved you. “For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate you from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As Christians, trusting in the divine aid, remember that the fervent effectual prayer of a righteous man availeth much; prefer
your

your humble petition to the throne of grace, pray to the Lord of all things in behalf of your bleeding country. Implore him that it may be healed of its wounds, that it may be cured of its dire disease. Reflect on whom you place your confidence, and fall not from him. In the day of battle let him be your fortress and your castle; "He is a rock of defence; he is mighty to save." And should abundance fail, be temperate in all things, looking up to him for relief. "Seek not what ye shall eat, nor what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind." Exert your own best endeavours, and then trust in Providence, for he careth for you, and knoweth that you have need of all these things. "Consider the ravens, for they sow not; neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feedeth them: Are ye not much better than they?" Whatever danger shall beset, or calamity assail; in the threat of famine, or the peril of the sword; still trust thou in the Lord, and stay upon thy God. Repent and live to him, and he will be intreated of the land.

Let us then lift up our hearts unto the Lord; let us pray to the Almighty for his grace and favour, for his aid and protection, that he may be intreated of us: And may religion and the moral virtues spring up amongst us; may the christian graces of faith, hope, and charity, be the ornament of the age; may sincerity, patience, justice, temperance, and integrity, be the exercise of our hearts and understanding; may whatever is lovely, and of good report, flourish and abound to the latest generations; may war, and its concomitant evils, be felt no more; may intestine dissensions and party rage, and *divisions* of every sort, civil or religious, public or private, sink to their native hell and dark abode; may concord, and a happy *union*, bless the empire throughout all its connections:—and thou, O peace serene, of gentle and engaging character, too long, alas! estranged and banished from this weeping realm, return—at length return, and bring in thy smiling train, sweet plenty, domestic happiness, and public joy. Then shall our hearts rejoice and sing; and then may we
glad

glad our eyes to behold those blessings which attend on a religious, a virtuous, and a happy people;—"that our sons may grow up as the young plants, and that our daughters may be as the polished corners of the temple;—that our garners may be full and plenteous with all manner of store;—that our sheep may bring forth thousands and ten thousands in our streets;—that our oxen may be strong to labour;—that there be no decay, no leading into captivity, and no complaining in our streets. Happy are the people that are in such a case; yea, blessed are the people who have the Lord for their God."

F I N I S.

